DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 028 168 TE 001 316

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English and the Arts.

Pub Date Dec 68

Note-7p.

Journal Cit-The Independent School Bulletin; v28 n2 p47-52 Dec 1968

EDRS Price MF-$0.25 HC-$0.45

Descriptors-American Culture, Communication (Thought Transfer), *Cultural Education, Cultural Enrichment, Cultural Factors, Culture, Curriculum Development, Curriculum Enrichment, *English Curriculum, English Instruction, Humanities Instruction, Language Arts, *Liberal Arts, *Mass Media, Multimedia Instruction, Nonverbal Communication, Student Development, *Teaching Methods

English, which enrolls all students, is the only humanities course capable of transmitting culture to everyone. Students respond to cultural stimuli other than books, however; and since many justifications for traditionally narrow English courses are demonstrably not valid, English subject matter should be broadened to include methods of communication other than writing. In grade 9, students could listen to records, stage plays, view films and slides, and write about the relationships among these presentations of reality. In grade 10, teachers could tailor their English writing assignments to the subject content and writing assignments in other courses. In grade 11, a major work of literature could be used to draw many ideas together, or various arts could be studied individually. In grade 12, students could take up more difficult classical ideas and examine contemporary methods of expression. Through such a program the student would acquire a better understanding of modern communications and of the media available for artistic expression. (LH)

ED 028168

THE INDEPENDENT SCHOOL BULLETIN

DECEMBER 1968
VOL. 28, NO. 2

NAIS

AFTER PROTEST, WHAT?
A LIBERAL TEACHER RECANTS
DEDICATED PROFESSIONALS ARE BETTER
ENGLISH AND THE ARTS
REPORTING AND MARKING PRACTICES
...AND OTHER ARTICLES AND DEPARTMENTS

TE 001 316

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ENGLISH AND THE ARTS

RUSSELL MEAD

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS COPYRIGHTED MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY Russell Mead and Esther Dysood, NAIS TO ERIC AND ORGANIZATIONS OPERATING UNDER AGREEMENTS WITH THE U.S. OFFICE OF EDUCATION. FURTHER REPRODUCTION OUTSIDE THE ERIC SYSTEM REQUIRES PERMISSION OF THE COPYRIGHT OWNER."

BECAUSE this essay must be short, it is a series of condensed assertions in a blunt style. I ask you to be suspicious of the following judgments, but to overlook the sound of bombast or smugness. I do not intend to shock or to annoy.

As curriculum committees ponder what English programs should be, I wonder if the purpose of English ought to be determined, not by anything in the nature of the subject itself but by its existence as the only humanities course, and a four-year one at that, which enrolls all the students in a school. It is the only course in college-preparatory tracks which is required to teach no specific information for college or for College Boards, and is the only long-term development from which no student may be excused. It is thus the only sequential period when, in a semi-familial, multi-tribal society, we may be certain of passing on whatever remains of our culture to our children; and in American liberal education, only English is required of all the young: there are no requirements in music, painting, sculpture, dance, architecture, or other arts. That statement is simple to make, but I think one can infer a great deal from what our society has decided *not* to teach its young.

English programs as programs of literature and composition are generally sound, but because of their focus on words they are naturally an inaccurate picture of contemporary culture and an inadequate one of the past; and, because they concentrate on words, they do not respond to the artistic needs of the majority of students. The assumption is that reading and writing are the primary intellectual tools and thus, given a limited time in school, they are most important. I do not believe this argument is complete, for it seems unreasonable that in a society where people in practice speak, listen, and watch more than they read and write, their faculties for these three actions have not been exposed to other than random criticism or training at any point in twelve years of compulsory schooling, with the result that our citizens must be able to do such work as recognize imagistic themes or differentiate among sixteenth century playwrights, but are not required to encounter any important work of any other art. To read the word-worlds of Joseph Andrews or Emma or Tess, but not to see, hear, or touch the world of the past seems lunacy.

OFTEN, we in English do employ other forms, but film and recorded poets are not amplifications of a literary work; they are works in themselves whose scriptions are at best convenient shorthands for the intended effect. Exciting photographs ought not to stimulate good themes; they are themselves the results of other more profound stimulations. Mythological sculpture ought not to demonstrate the influence of the old stories; it is as much those ancient stories as the words of actual narration and, in many instances, pre-dates the written version. Music ought not to teach the student rhythm so that he can see how scansion works, not because the two different rhythms stem from irreconcilable sources but because music encountered only as rhythm, like film as adaptation, or recording as a way of checking an actor's interpretation of Hamlet, is an emasculation, and though useful in the enrichment of literature, is fallacious because of what it teaches by inference

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Mr. Mead, who teaches at Concord Academy, Concord, Massachusetts, has prepared a statement on "A Future English Curriculum," in which film is far more than a new fad tacked on an existing curriculum.

about the purpose and nature of these other arts, in the absence of direct instruction.

A flat judgment is impossible, but among other causes of the humanities' becoming literature alone may be the state of visual and dramatic arts in nineteenth century America and England; the power of particular writers of the time; the high-speed presses, with less economical visual capability; the lack of mechanical reproduction of sounds at a time when print became cheap; the finite number of paintings and sculpture in single geographic locations in relation to the rising number of people in schools who were incapable of reaching those locations; the development of more highly organized tools of literary than of visual or musical criticism; the cost and scarcity of qualified instructors in a system of total education; the word-orientation of the dominant educational theorists; and the cumulative effect on progressive generations of teachers who were products of word-dominance. Given even one generation of word-orientation, we might assume that students who became educators would look at their subjects within the word-frame of their own training.

Page-orientation strikes me as a fairly recent historical event, and I find little in the twentieth century, or in the culture of ancient Egypt or Greece, to suggest that word-teaching accurately reflects those cultures about which it generalizes in text after text.

On the other hand, I am not striking for the recent fad, demand for a change in education because society has changed. It is unquestionably different from that of the nineteenth century, but our modern prophets are as shortsighted as their targets; and if their training had consisted of dance, music, and art in equal proportion to literature, they might have discovered that the excitement of all media, the power of more fluid forms, is not something new. The omnipresence of films and television is indeed startling, but it is in this total presence that change exists, not simply in the nature of form – something to which any good Greek playwright/poet/composer/actor could bear witness.

OF ALL the faculty in schools, you who are English teachers may least desire a change; you are by bent word-oriented, loving words, and reading and writing with pleasure. But if you have ever assigned "Euclid alone/Has looked . . . ." and been unsatisfied with your verbal explanation of it; or have avoided showing the film *Macbeth* before assigning the play, because students might not read the play; or have not brought in other arts because it was difficult to make them "fit" the syllabus, then you should feel that something is wrong. It was not just old Edna's way when she saw that to perceive a truth-unity in wholly visual terms is a spectacular feeling. A student who will not read *Macbeth* after seeing the film may be lazy, but he may have had the experience the playwright intended and not need to go beyond that into the province (the page) of producers of plays before the fact and of scholars afterward. I am not demeaning textual study, simply asking for other studies. If art moves you but will not fit a syllabus, even though at some point you turned to it, then something is wrong with the syllabus, not with your teaching; and we may not be communicating unless you also find it slightly odd that the phrase "unutterable beauty" may imply to an English teacher that a beauty can't be expressed, not that it simply cannot be put into *words.*

Now, you may agree that the other arts should reach our young but object to the sacrifice of those things which, even with cramming and consolidating, you need four years to do. It is possible, I must answer, that we waste time because, unlike teachers of other literature courses, such as French, we have never had to codify and structure into a limited space, having been handed four years and told simply to fill them. In addition, much of what we do may go beyond the needs of our students into the area of the professional scholar.

There are other objections, too; for one, that we teach appreciation of literature so that it becomes a habit. Yet in a society of 150 million adults, the sale of 100,000 copies of a book (.07%) makes it a best seller, while 40-plus million persons each day spend the same amount of time that it would take to read the book watching television; but if watching is more attractive to a great number of people, it is not because you are doing a bad job. Thinkers in education have decided that of all the perceptions of beauty (color, form, motion, rhythm, pitch, word), our entire population should receive assistance only in the full understanding of the word. That adults do not limit themselves to the word is not a reflection on English teaching but a reflection of the variety of perceptual stimuli to which human beings respond.

ANOTHER defense of the *status quo* is that we must prepare students for college. For what part? I know you agree that four years' preparation for college freshman English courses is absurd, but I wonder, too, whether what we do is relevant to the college or noncollege education of all but the

literature major. We do teach students to write, I know, but to write what? In how many English courses are students taught the languages of lab reports, history papers, sociology case studies, and lectures of all kinds? Even instruction in letter writing and intelligent conversational skills is relegated to general tracks, missing the students whose professions will demand these skills most.

Our students are taught well enough perhaps to write certain kinds of essays and literary criticism, but I think we have deluded ourselves that skill in one form of articulation is skill in others. Certainly, the rise of media study points to dramatic differences in similar language forms rather than to similarity. The forms of writing we assign are so limited that, although they can be competently written by students, they do very little to meet the demands of most other writing – that is, the passing on of quantities of information; and although we teach the limitation of subject and the expressing of important ideas, and have developed good methods for this in the humanities, the application to other fields is left to the student alone, without the aid of the writing instructor.

And if one says that liberality, or well-roundedness, or liberal arts is the job of the college, another look might show that colleges are narrower and more pedantic than secondary schools. A greater variety of courses is required for admission *to* college than for graduation *from* it, and of those courses which may be taken to round out the student's education, in most colleges all but freshman English may be opted either for the appropriate general requirement or as a prerequisite for the specific major study. Add to this the specialized interest of the college teacher and the rise in number of advanced-placement courses, and we must conclude that the college focus is toward professional study.

In addition, it is the secondary school that is the last educational institution which all Americans are required to attend. It is also the last one where centralization of control over many institutions (in school districts) provides the power to change in an atmosphere where responsibility to society is still greater than that to individual disciplines.

And a present-day secondary education consisting of a science course, a mathematics course, and three verbally oriented courses is not liberal, nor does it answer the societal demand that schools produce an educated citizenry, capable of reason and balance. Theoretically, and I think historically, educational systems strive for the development of the qualities of the ideal citizen, varying as that ideal varies, and what we are teaching now is the pursuit of a competence which primarily a small section of the nineteenth century would laud; not an understanding and control of the visual and tonal forms which dominate our world today.

I do not suggest, either, that youth knows more than its elders; but where youth is rebellious or bored, its hostility would not be directed toward school and college unless they seemed in the students' minds to stand for unfair impositions, or unless they were themselves a source of imposition. I don't mean that all children will love to go to school if all the arts are taught; but I am discouraged that so many of the best students I meet, capable of intelligent thinking and sensitive to the difficulties teachers face, should judge their school experience wasted. The irrelevance of much of our curriculum to disadvantaged children has been, if anything, overdocumented, and the revolt of parent groups against the watered-down tracks of college courses for the "C" student suggests another set of children for whom the school day is nothing but marking time.

AFTER these generalizations, which hurt the cause of English more than any suggested changes could do, I should like to oversimplify what an English faculty can do: not the work they ought to be doing as teachers of English but the work which has no other place in the curriculum and for which, as far as I can tell, no one else would be as well qualified. It is this more than anything: that the job must be done and there is nowhere or no one else to do it.

The grade-by-grade suggestions which follow need not be a specific syllabus, but rather, kinds of ways in which other arts can be handled by the teacher of English. The outlines are not complete and are weighted toward literary examples, because I assume the reader's thinking about curriculum is similarly oriented; but if there are those still reading who would like to have suggestions of specific texts, recordings, or course sequences, I will gladly send the longer guidelines of our own department conversion, argue points, or – best of responses – get further suggestions for revision from those better versed in the arts than I.

Grades nine around the land read mythology, and sometimes Bible stories, as a background for later literature. Artists in all media use these stories, and if the child's first encounter with them were in the other art forms as well, I think he would have less a sense of marking time getting background and more a sense of natural follow-up. Cultural-enrichment teaching often shows how a

painter retells a Bible story or myth, but I think it may not be clear in such a context that "story" means not words of narration but patterns or relationships between human beings or between human and superhuman beings, and that the artist's response is not to the story but to the pattern.

Many schools use different arts in all grades but begin with the literal version, or feel forced to relate to it. I should think that a more catholic approach, and an emphasis on the student's experience confronting these primal patterns, would be more exciting than present approaches.

A few specific suggestions for grade nine, then: Listen to a recording of *The Book of Job* without reading it. Study only paintings of the temptation and expulsion. Get four students to stage *Noah's Wyf* and to answer questions about the story. Study the sculpture "Sacrifice of Isaac," before you *tell* the story. Get someone in the music department to talk about Greek music; get the Stratford film of *Oedipus;* then ask what significance, in relation to these two, Euclid's geometry might have to a life concept. After that, you might read the usual, *The Iliad* or someone's book on mythology. Slides are available of the sequence of windows in some European cathedrals; and pictures, with dimensions, of Greek buildings do something more, I think, than illustrate a word point. Teaching history of religion, for instance, is almost oversimplified by the examination of houses of worship from the Mayans or Egyptians to the present.

Let students' writing in this year reach for the relationships they see between different statements: between the stories of Orpheus, perhaps, and films from that pattern. Let students respond to their own responses through a journal of commentary, or by listening to what they have said and taped in class time.

I think ninth-graders will find naturally the need for devices of description and organization which you would like to teach, and in a relatively neat inductive setting. Students should respond also in different media from words, perhaps on assignment. I wonder if it bothers anyone else that we assume all students can be taught eventually to write but avoid companion assumptions. (One keeps coming back to the definition of man's difference from the animals in his ability to abstract, and the textbook example of that in *words.)* I have only experimented for a year, but on that basis I would say that the student who expresses himself *best* in a medium *other* than words is in the *majority,* even with the heavy word-background of his schooling.

GRADE ten should concentrate on science and history. It is often the first year in the independent schools when everyone who will graduate is present, and students need to be taught as soon as possible to write for these subjects. No knowledge of verb liveliness or pruning of adjectives will help to write a history paper, because vividity, our goal, lies in those portions of history texts which describe events, whereas student assignments are like those passages which unite previous materials and draw conclusions – and for them a different technique is employed. Good novelists slip in a verb every five to seven words, but even readable historians run along at one in ten, and 40 per cent of those are some form of the verb "to be." The structure Subject Equals Predicate, no matter how poor a technique it seems in English, *is* the technique of historical conclusion drawing. All that we teach our students about good writing, based as it is on examples with shorter, more active, more immediate goals, tends in fact to undermine student response to the material of history courses and, in a different way, to science texts.

In this tenth year, as in all years, you must secure a grade compromise from other teachers so that you can take part in the students' planning and writing of papers before they submit them to other courses, and can continue the job of revision after the papers have been graded.

You know the agony of trying to find good theme topics and how often students tell you they couldn't think of anything to write about – or didn't have any ideas on the assigned topic, which is the same thing. In papers for other courses, they have a vested, if mechanical, interest in what is being said; and helping a student revise is effective only when he has something definite to say. With all respect, I have often found that assignments for science and history are generally more focused and specific than those for English. Drawing in other subject-area assignments and including other arts should insure that a student will have something that he wishes, or is forced, to say. What he writes may lack form, but it will not lack a need for the right words, and a student with that need is one you can help.

The biology and history texts will show how information is passed in our different languages, and you will find yourself searching for a vocabulary of analysis to describe differences between, say, poetry and lab experiments. The new grammars focus too closely to be of much help, and you may wish to rely on student observations for this vocabulary.

Since forms and languages are the natural focus here, read and see and listen with this idea of

structure and vocabulary of structure in mind, using the old terms in different but attractive ways when they must describe a picture or melody. The "vocabulary" of a picture and the "grammar" of a song are valuable concepts and can be great classroom questions, if the teacher doesn't mind different conclusions every class period. And these attempts, far from simply "jazzing up" literature, will have a direct bearing on language study. The rhythms of English prose are more like a Laurel and Hardy comic sequence than iambic pentameter. The dips and falls, the pause, the lift near the end of sentence or paragraph conform much more closely to film and dramatic scenes than to word-metrics. When you wish a transition to the formalism of music and poetry, you can use a modern dance class, or a film of modern dance. Its frequent violation of melodic phrasing is a compromise between free movement and the parallelistic regularity of formal rhythm schemes. I apologize for the tinge of rhetoric in that sentence, but it points out that even the physical education department will produce material, especially in the studies in language or film or sculpture or rhythm, harmonics, and motion. In this area, the teacher with even minimal knowledge of music can bring in mathematics; and with some knowledge of optics, you will find that color intensity and vowel energy have a relationship you may not have suspected.

GRADE eleven seems the best time for all the literary tools to come out. Two preceding years with little literary focus can be drawn together before they blur. One might chop up the year into highly concentrated blocks of differing arts, or use a central work to draw many pieces together. A single year or decade might be studied. One might listen to *Faustus,* read what Goethe wrote on the inner ear, and try the Romantics – Carlyle and Dickens. One might ask what the social order was in 1830. How do you know? Who is telling you? What is it now? What arts seem specifically to have been the ones of protest in 1830? In 500 B.C.? Which ones were the tools of the aristocracy? Which arts dominated?

Under such a scheme, the student would not encounter literature from every period, or even century, during his secondary schooling, but I would gladly give up British literature in pre-sixteenth century, eighteenth century, late nineteenth, and even seventeenth century, to secure these other goals; and I am not trying to generalize about the periods, only to suggest relative values, for I seriously question whether or not the whole person in his teens should encounter the intellectual complexities of Joyce, Sartre, or even Shakespeare, or the language problems prior to 1800 *before* he has begun to "read" on even elemental visual and kinetic levels.

I should actually favor literature in the junior year, however, if for no other reason than the easing of temptation for teachers to compensate for the literaturelessness of other years.

GRADE twelve might be the time for two quite different things: greater concern with more difficult classical ideas, and the contemporary arts. I can think of no logical reason that the entire year should be a continuous flow from September to June. Any number of schemes could hold, of course, but I'd be tempted, in the first half, to study Wheelwright's *A Critical Introduction to Ethics,* and the *Modern Religion Series,* or its many paperback equivalents, along with *The Inferno, Hamlet, The Fixer,* or even Joyce's *Portrait;* and to look at Byzantine art, primitive arts, and nineteenth century music. In the second half, I'd look at films as films, at television, at

contemporary sculpture, at black music, at theater of the absurd, and if there was time, at a few poets and novelists. I'd ask my students to select the expression of their choice: that is, to write a review of a film or to respond with a sketch, a melody, or another film.

Whatever the approach, criticism may be more valid, now that students will have a broader artistic background; and fair, but honest, criticism might help the independent school problem of the transition of its students from its near-coddling of the individual to the common-indifference of the college freshman year.

And in this free exchange the teacher will have less responsibility for scholastic truisms and more opportunity to draw relationships, to be more the whole person himself.

I THINK by ignoring in each of these years most of the biographical or historical existence of the artist you will gain greater awareness of the relationship between him and his work, which is usually the reason to introduce artist-in-his-time material. The student may know less of the outlines of literature of any century, but he will have far greater understanding of the number of ways in which the artist might have expressed himself, with a companion insight into the characteristics of each art clearer than that which the study of any single one could produce, and a much more profound sense than from lectures of what it means to the culture of a period when one art dominates through innovation, or is more socially acceptable, or is banned.

These changes will demand of the teacher a willingness to admit ignorance and a desire to capitalize on it. Much of our past trouble with teaching, and I think our present difficulty with those taught, has arisen because we are near experts and have demanded of our students too swift a movement from ignorance to near-professional competence, bypassing enthusiastic confusion.

Course labels will be difficult to invent, and the purpose of the curriculum may be too simple: to introduce the young to their past culture and to educate them to form an intelligent future based on choice rather than reaction, or if you wish, synthesis rather than antithesis.

If you attempt this kind of change, you will give up the name of expert for the difficult responsibility of choosing from a variety of forms and works immensely more complicated than our present treasure house; but with this responsibility should come a new freedom which will ease the boredom of habit, which is too often the teacher's lot, and a lifting of the burden of that goal which motivates so much departmental theorizing, that of producing mini-scholars.

You will not have passed on the sum of your knowledge, but you should find yourself, and one hopes humbly, in the position of being the only teacher in the lives of your students who has made all learning converge. That's a go-forth-and-sin-no-more way to close a paper, and I mean no pretentiousness – but my sketch of a head bowed in modest solemnity seemed dreadfully melodramatic.